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# **POWHATAN APARTMENTS**

4950 South Chicago Beach Drive  
Chicago, Illinois

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Preliminary Staff Summary of Information  
Submitted to the Commission on Chicago Landmarks  
November, 1991

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# **THE POWHATAN APARTMENTS**

**4950 South Chicago Beach Drive  
Chicago, Illinois**

**Architects: Robert DeGolyer and Charles Morgan**

**Dates of Construction: 1927-29**

Few buildings in Chicago are as distinct in their architectural form and detailing as the Powhatan Apartments. Located on the lakefront at 50th Street, the Powhatan literally and figuratively stands apart from others in the grace and dignity of its design. The building is one of the last of the apartments built in the halcyon days of expensive, high-rise apartment construction from the end of World War I through the Depression. Unlike the derivative architecture of the apartments built during this period, the Powhatan is striking in its expressionism, a design that adheres to the precepts of modern architecture first enunciated by Louis Sullivan almost a half century before.

Beyond its architectural significance, the Powhatan is representative of the change in land use in Hyde Park resulting from changes to the Lake Michigan shore during the 1920s. Fueled by several factors, including the desire to create a roadway linking Grant Park and Jackson Park, and the plan to locate the Century of Progress Exposition on the south lakefront, the South Park Commission undertook a large scale landfill project on the lakefront between 23rd and 55th streets. As that public works project proceeded, developers took actions to see that these newly created sections of East Hyde Park would develop as a tract of first-class, highrise apartments.

## ***In the Beginning . . .***

The first public announcement of the Powhatan was in newspaper articles published in September, 1927. The article in the *Chicago Tribune* for September 25, 1927, describing the project and the principals involved, was enthusiastic in its tone, going so far as to compare the anticipated results of construction of the Powhatan and other buildings in the immediate vicinity with the fashionable Streeterville area on the Near North Side. The comparison was an especially apt one, even at such an early time, as both areas were products of landfill operations. Unlike its North Side counterpart, and what makes the vision of the Powhatan promoters remarkable, was the short time that had elapsed between the fill operation and the

building announcement. Unlike Streeterville, where the high-class residential development occurred decades after the lake had been filled in, developers of the Powhatan and adjacent properties committed themselves to their building scheme within months, if not weeks, of the creation of the land itself.

The "land" on which the Powhatan was built had been the subject of controversy between the South Parks Commissioners and the Chicago Beach Hotel since 1910, when the Park Board, responding to criticism of the condition of the south lakefront, began to challenge accretions to the lakefront by private owners and to consider implementing recreational and landscaping improvements along the lines of those proposed by Daniel Burnham and Edward Bennett in the *Plan of Chicago* (1909). The original Chicago Beach Hotel, built in 1892 for the Columbian Exposition, was one of the most famous resort hotels in the Midwest. This first hotel was at Hyde Park Boulevard (51st Street) and the lake shore, which was then located at East End Avenue. Over the years, through the construction of piers and breakwaters, the hotel "created" additional property through the build-up of sand and other fill. By 1915, accretions had expanded the hotel's holdings to include property bounded by Cornell Avenue, Hyde Park Boulevard, present-day Chicago Beach Drive (which is now an access road immediately west of Lake Shore Drive), and the lakefront (which, at Hyde Park Boulevard, started at approximately present-day Chicago Beach Drive and ran northwesterly to a point at what is now approximately Cornell Avenue just north of 50th Street). By 1915, the dispute between the South Park Commissioners and the hotel regarding possession of approximately seven acres of the man-made portions of the hotel's property was resolved in favor of the hotel.

Subsequent plans to create Burnham Park as a lakefront park between 14th Street and Jackson Park, and to build the south portion of Lake Shore Drive (originally named "Leif Erickson Drive"), brought about further negotiations by which the South Parks Commissioners ceded another nine acres of property to the hotel in 1926 in exchange for the hotel's waiver of its riparian rights relating to the lake shore. At this point the Chicago Beach property included all of the area, some of which was still underwater, between Cornell Avenue, Hyde Park Boulevard, Chicago Beach Drive, and Burnham Park (the southern boundary of which is approximately 450 feet north of 49th Street).

With the addition of these new tracts to its holdings, the Chicago Beach became a major factor in the development of the south lakefront. The hotel announced the Chicago Beach Hotel Development in mid-1926, subdividing property with an eye toward the sale of parcels for the development of prestigious residential highrises. A July 29, 1927 article in the *Hyde Park Herald* reported that the streets north of Hyde Park Boulevard, within the Chicago Beach tract, were being laid out, as well as sewage and drainage lines. Coinciding with the upgrading of the area, the hotel tore down its original 1892 building; a much larger, reinforced concrete structure, built in 1920 and located immediately east of the old hotel, between East End Avenue and Chicago Beach Drive, continued the operation.

In light of the imminent changes to the area, zoning became an issue for the new lakefront tracts, as people recognized what would take place in a community where single-family homes still predominated and that had a quality very much akin to a small village. Small-town character notwithstanding, changes to the zoning code implemented in early 1928 allowed the



A view taken in 1929, looking northwest, showing the cluster of buildings in the Chicago Beach development area. The Chicago Beach Hotel is the building with the curved driveway, fronting on Hyde Park Boulevard; immediately behind it to the north are the Powhatan (right) and the Narragansett (left), both under construction. The two other buildings shown are the 5000 East End Building and the Barclay Apartments at 4940 East End Avenue. By this time, the portions of Leif Erickson Drive north of 39th Street and between Hyde Park Boulevard (5100 south) and 55th Street had been completed; work had not yet begun on the connecting portion between 39th and 51st. (*Chicago Aerial Survey Photograph, courtesy of the Chicago Park District Special Collections*)



Its design evoking the loftiness of the skyscraper form, the Powhatan Apartments has a commanding presence on the lake shore at 50th Street. This view of the Powhatan (foreground) and the Narragansett (background) was taken in 1930. (*Hedrich-Blessing photograph, courtesy of the Chicago Historical Society*)

construction of twenty-four-story highrises in much of the area east of the Illinois Central Railroad tracks between 50th and 56th streets.

Construction in the Chicago Beach Development began in late 1927 with the 5000 East End Building (1928-29; Robert DeGolyer, architect). The permit for the Powhatan was applied for in December 1927. Permits for the Barclay, at 4928 East End Avenue (1928-29; B. Leo Steif, architect) and the Narragansett (1640 East 50th Street; 1928-30; Leichenko & Esser, architects, in association with Charles Morgan) were obtained in August and November 1928, respectively. The 5000 Cornell Building (Connelly & Carlson, architects) was begun in April 1929 and finished one year later.

### *Robert DeGolyer and Charles Morgan, Architects*

Both the Powhatan and the Narragansett, immediately to the west, were developed by the Garard Trust, headed by Elzy Anderson Garard. Garard, who was a dealer in bonds, resided in Hyde Park as did the contractor for the project, David B. Johnson of Charles B. Johnson & Son, Inc. The building was planned as a cooperative and, according to press reports, Garard stated that he expected shares to be bought quickly by his friends. By April 15, 1928, the *Chicago Tribune* was reporting that a sales office had been opened at the site. The sales office was a curiosity of its own, as it was a miniature version of the elaborate penthouse, with all of the finials and tracery, yet to be built. During this pre-construction phase, modifications to the original plan occurred, the most notable being the reduction of the number of apartments per floor, from three to two. In addition, according to the papers of architect Robert DeGolyer, another building was contemplated by the same developers, as late as July 1928, to be built immediately to the north of the Powhatan. It is not clear whether the plan for this other building was selected and built as the Narragansett Apartments or whether a third structure was actually contemplated. Construction of the Powhatan finally began in October 1928.

The architects for the project, Robert DeGolyer and Charles Morgan, brought considerable talents to bear on the development. Their responsibilities were divided, DeGolyer in charge of the overall layout of the buildings as well as the structural and mechanical systems, and Morgan supervising the aesthetic aspects of the edifice, including the design of the principal facades, the terra-cotta ornamental panels, and interior mosaics.

Robert Seeley DeGolyer (1876-1952) was one of the city's leading architects, having been the designer of many of the best known apartments in Chicago. Born and raised in Evanston, DeGolyer graduated from M.I.T. in 1898 and worked for three years in Chicago before moving to Los Angeles to work for architect John H. Parkinson. He returned to Chicago in 1905 to work for the firm of Marshall and Fox whose designs dominated the luxury apartments market in Chicago for the first three decades of this century. DeGolyer established his own architectural practice in 1915. The type and style of DeGolyer's work with his own firm was very much keeping with his work for Marshall and Fox: residences and hotels in traditional, classical or historical revival styles. The Barry Apartments on Sheridan Road at Barry Avenue

(1924-25), one of a number of large apartment buildings he designed on Sheridan Road and Lake Shore Drive, and the Ambassador East Hotel on North State Parkway (1927-28) are characteristic designs. From 1935 to 1943, DeGolyer practiced with Walter T. Stockton. During this time, when private construction virtually came to a halt, DeGolyer received a commission from the federal Public Works Administration to head a temporary association of fifteen architects planning the Julia C. Lathrop Homes at Diversey Avenue and the North Branch of the Chicago River which opened in 1938. DeGolyer participated in the design of the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., and served with the Engineer Corps of the U.S. Army and the Defense Plant Corporation during the war years.

Charles Morgan's career was similarly notable. Morgan (1890-1947) was born in Mount Vernon, Illinois, and graduated from the University of Illinois in 1914. Although Morgan was a licensed architect, his prominence stemmed from his architectural renderings, including ones for the Field Museum, the Adler Planetarium, Soldier Field, the London Guarantee Building, and the Board of Trade. He was a professor of architecture at the University of Kansas, and in 1929 he began a professional association with Frank Lloyd Wright for any Chicago projects that Wright might undertake. Unfortunately, nothing of substance ever came of that association. Morgan's most notable design was for a project named the "Rainbow Bridge" for Lake Shore Drive at Randolph Street. The project was a twenty-five-story, multi-colored, terra-cotta clad, combination bridge and office tower. Morgan's artistic skills, combined with his architectural experience, gave him unique abilities which he exploited to their fullest in the Powhatan to give it both a distinct image and a high degree of artistic craftsmanship.

### *The Powhatan and Chicago's Role in Modern Architecture*

The Powhatan design is a dynamic expression of modernist principles in architecture, free of the derivative elements of historic architecture. The design eschews references to Jacobean, Renaissance, or Georgian prototypes that dressed many contemporary apartment buildings and instead reflects a more progressive design philosophy.

The aesthetic treatment of the Powhatan was the fulfillment of its promoters' vision, as reported in the *Tribune* announcement for the building:

The Powhatan, as the new skyscraper has been christened, will be characterized by the sweeping lines of the most up to the minute thought in American architecture and it will present an imposing appearance from the parkland now being reclaimed from the lake, on which it will face.

The Powhatan is a twenty-two story, reinforced concrete structure, with a Bedford limestone and terra-cotta curtain wall on its two principal elevations. The main elevations have a three-part division, consisting of a three-story base with windows recessed in narrow, round-arched openings, the eighteen-story main body, and the stylized crenellated, or notched, parapet. The

east, or lakeside, elevation has an additional story for the rooftop ballroom which is itself topped by two massive towers.

Overall, there is a traditional character to the design, derived largely from the symmetrical patterns of the two principal facades. On the north, there are fourteen windows at each floor, grouped in a 1-2-1-3-3-1-2-1 pattern. The seventeen windows on the east have an approximately symmetrical composition of 2-3-3-3-3-1-2. With the exception of the two entrances on 50th Street and Chicago Beach Drive, as well as the 50th Street driveway opening, the windows are in continuous tiers from the ground to top floor.

The most distinctive aspect of the Powhatan is its expression of height and verticality. As a reinforced concrete structure, the outer walls have no supporting function and theoretically could have been left as absolutely flat surfaces. In fact, the walls on the first through third floors are rendered in just such a manner. In contrast, the walls from the fourth floor to the top of the building have a strong sculptural quality. A rhythmic pattern of piers and mullions are applied to the building, projecting from the building plane and continuing uninterrupted to their termination at the roofline as abstracted finials. Structurally, these piers and mullions have no purpose; their function is aesthetic, evoking the loftiness of the skyscraper form.

The building is distinguished as well by its extraordinary and prolific use of color and by the highly original images found on the terra-cotta panels. Charles Morgan's proficiency in the disciplines of fine-art painting and architecture brought to the Powhatan a unique blending of talents. The spandrels at the fourth floor and above are filled with vividly colored, flat terra-cotta panels. Executed in earth tones of red and green, the insets are impressionistic images based on American Indian culture and include renderings of arrowheads, the moon and sun, a wigwam, lightning, and other elements of Indian life. At the bottom of each spandrel is a wave, a reference to the adjacent lake. In all, eight different scenes are illustrated; however, each panel is rendered in various hues. Thus, any effect of repetition is minimized. (By comparison, the nine different panels on the adjacent Narragansett, also done by Morgan, are abstractions of animals in conjunction with the sun or moon or comets.) The scenes were apparently stamped into the terra cotta, each block then being hand painted before the blocks were fired in the kiln. The spandrels at the second and third floors are different from those above, as they have more representational images of Indian figures and animals stamped into the glossy black blocks. The employment of American Indian imagery is an obvious reflection of an attempt to move toward a new ornamental vocabulary.

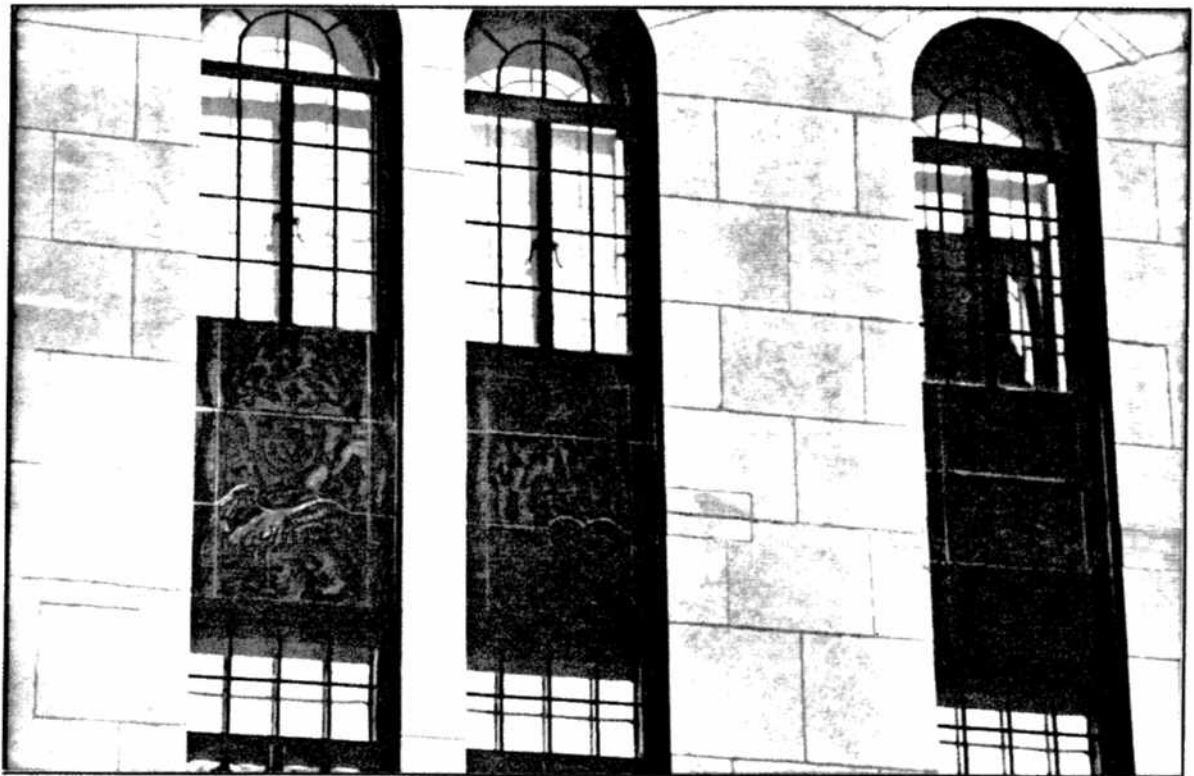
The use of flat, polychromatic, terra-cotta panels is noteworthy from a technological perspective. Although the material had been in widespread use as a finish material on buildings since the 1880s, it had often been used as a decorative alternative to stone, and, as such, it was developed as a relief or sculptural element. Advancements in the technology for coloring and glazing terra cotta during the mid-1920s broadened the decorative potential of the material. The panels on the Powhatan are representative of the innovations in this important industry in Chicago building.

Color was an integral aspect of the interior design as well, as small mosaics, executed by Morgan, were located in the entry vestibule and in the natatorium, or swimming pool room. Unfortunately, the series of colorful mosaics in the natatorium, illustrating sailing, bridges, seashores, and other images of water, no longer survive. Also gone is a large mosaic that was





The treatment of the spandrels varies between the colorful impressionistic scenes depicting themes from American Indian culture employed throughout the main body of the building (*above*) and the incised, representational images on glossy black panels used on the first three floors (*below*). (*Timothy Wittman, photographer*)



on the wall above the lobby fireplace, depicting Chief Powhatan in a dynamic pose, reining in his stallion.

The public interiors--that is, the entry vestibule, lobby, swimming pool, and top-floor ballroom--were finished in elaborately detailed Art Deco style. The linear qualities of the architecture lent themselves especially well to the rectilinear features of this contemporary vocabulary. With the notable exception of the front doors and the elevator cabs, which depict angular images of Indian braves, the Deco metalwork in the Powhatan was limited to abstract linear designs for the grilles over ceiling light fixtures, windows, and elevator grilles. The lobby, replete with overstuffed chairs and geometric tables, appears to have been finished with a variegated colored wallpaper of crescents and other subdued geometric patterns.

In its focus on architectural expressionism and the development of an original ornamental treatment, the Powhatan is characteristic of the revival of the aesthetic concepts that fueled Chicago's architectural development during the late nineteenth century. Beginning in the 1880s, Chicago architects pioneered in the development of skeletal construction whereby buildings could be built taller and with much more effective use of space than was possible with traditional masonry architecture. With such technological advancements, the load-bearing characteristics of building facades disappeared, making them curtain walls. Thus the challenge became how to deal with the artistic treatment of the facades. Louis Sullivan was a leader in the formation of a new design aesthetic for the skyscraper form. Recognizing the verticality of the form as its essential characteristic, he exploited architectural elements on his facades to emphasize this quality. The revival of classical architectural forms, beginning with the Columbian Exposition of 1893 and continuing through the 1920s, undermined the influence of these ideals.

The revival of the architectural theories of Sullivan and his contemporaries is often pinpointed to Finnish architect Eliel Saarinen's entry for the *Chicago Tribune* Competition held in 1922, a design to which the Powhatan bears a strong resemblance. Saarinen's design consisted of a series of setback forms, the curtain walls of which were finished with a rhythmic series of projecting ribs giving the composition a decided vertical accent. Overall, the design emphasized purely architectural elements, such as massing, light and shadow, and visual rhythm rather than historic ornament. According to the critic Sheldon Cheney in *The New World Architecture*, Saarinen's "logical, powerful, nakedly impressive structure was the very flowering of Louis Sullivan's teachings." Commenting further on the affinity between Sullivan's ideals and Saarinen's facade treatment, Cheney wrote that it:

... exhibited the beauty that "vertical continuity," that loftiness, that flowering of formal beauty out of function which Sullivan had so long fought for, toward which he had taken the first practical steps thirty years earlier; and Sullivan hailed this as a fulfillment--as the complete miracle come true.

The basic concepts of Saarinen's scheme, strong vertical expression and less accented floor lines, were first employed by Sullivan in the Wainwright Building, built in St. Louis in 1891. Commenting in an article published in 1923 about the *Tribune* competition, Sullivan noted the

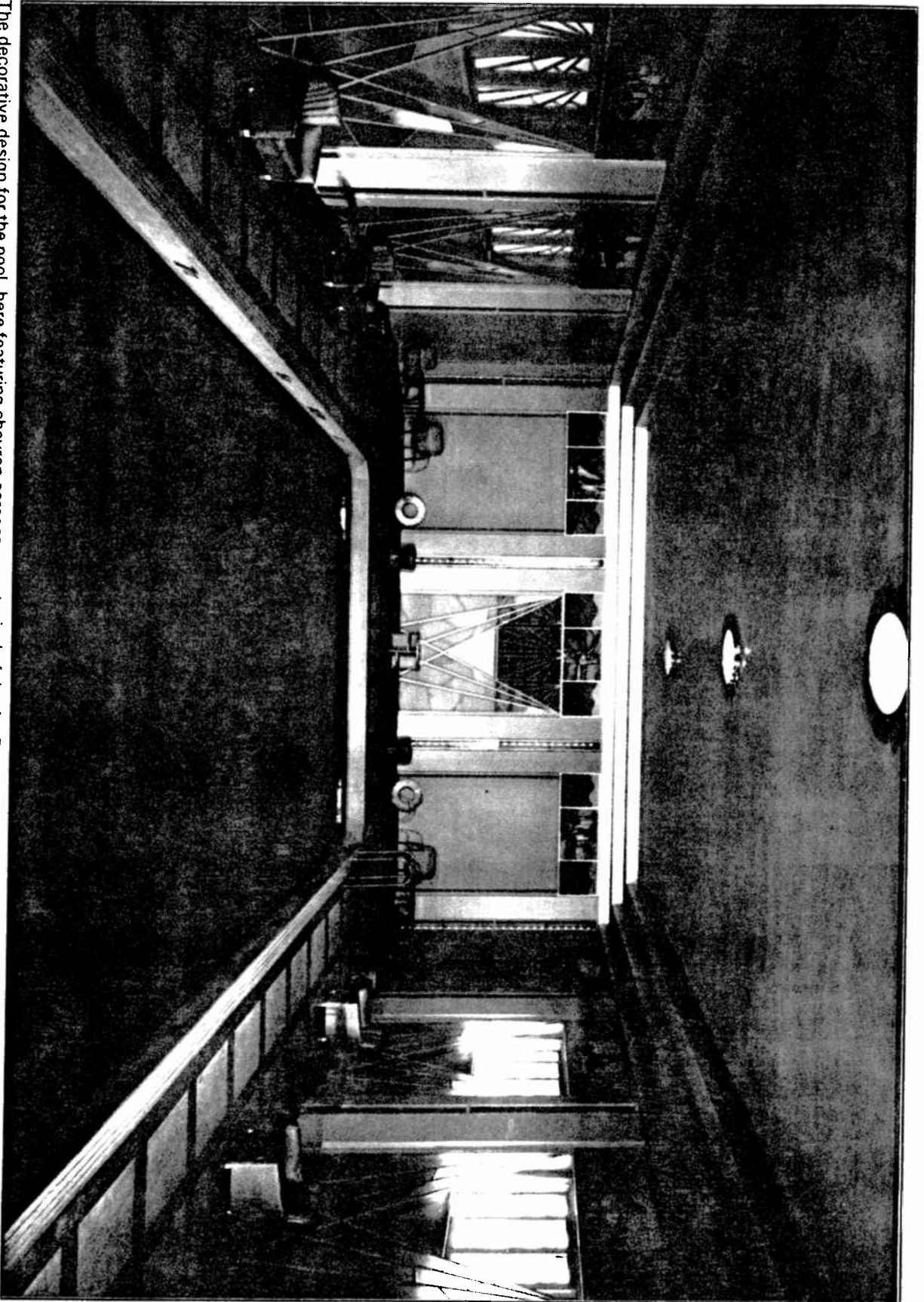
irony of the fact that the original aesthetic treatment he had developed for America's distinct contribution to world architecture, the skyscraper, had been appreciated best by a foreigner and not his own countrymen.

Saarinen's *Tribune* entry opened a new design era in American architecture as architects turned toward a more expressionistic, rather than historical, manner in their designs. These more progressive designs are referred to by Cheney as "stripped architecture" and typically feature a series of strong piers rising the full height of the facade, leaving the spandrels set back. The result was a strong vertical emphasis in which ornament became a subordinate and subdued aspect of the overall design. The Powhatan is among a handful of buildings in Chicago, and certainly the only apartment building of its scale, to reflect the subtleties of this important movement in American architecture.

### *Newer Developments*

The opening of the Powhatan coincided with the 1929 Stock Market crash (the last building inspector's status report for the building was November 5, 1929). This did not seem to have a direct impact on the building, as apartments leases, executed in the context of a cooperative arrangement, had probably long since been secured. From its opening and continuing through the present day, residents of the building have included a number of business, professional, and civic leaders. Prior residents include Walter Buettner, vice-president of the Bendix Aviation Corp.; Robert Frank Newhall, vice-president of the First National Bank of Chicago; jeweler Walter Clarence Peacock; structural and civil engineer Abraham Epstein, founder of A. Epstein and Sons, Inc.; and Maurice Goldblatt, chairman of Goldblatt Bros., Inc.

Although the Powhatan project itself seems to have been unfazed by the market crash, the Depression brought further development of the immediately adjacent area to a halt. The 5000 Cornell building, completed in 1930, was the fifth and last building of the Chicago Beach Development Project. Interestingly, prominent Swiss architectural historian Sigfried Gideon included a view of these five buildings in his authoritative volume on modern architecture, *Space, Time and Architecture*. Gideon used the photograph (unfortunately, reversed in publication) to highlight the benefits of extensive landscaping and open space around highrises. Citing a similarly configured building and landscape approach used by Le Corbusier in Buenos Aires in 1929, Gideon states: "What in the case of the Chicago apartment houses was perhaps owing to local economic circumstances is here proposed as principle." Further development of the area actually reflects this open scheme. Construction was renewed beginning in 1951, with the construction of the seven fourteen-story apartments between Hyde Park Boulevard, 50th Street, Cornell and East End avenues. One year later, the two twenty-two-story buildings at 1649 East 50th Street were constructed. Two other projects north of the Powhatan were developed in the 1960s, and ultimately in the early 1970s, the Regents Park apartment complex was built on the site of the Chicago Beach Hotel which was demolished in 1968.



The decorative design for the pool, here featuring chevron screens, was typical of the Art Deco styling throughout the interior public rooms. The mosaics were probably done by Charles Morgan, the architect in charge of decorative aspects of both the interior and exterior of the building. (Hedrich-Blessing photograph, courtesy of the Chicago Historical Society)

irony of the fact that the original aesthetic treatment he had developed for America's distinct contribution to world architecture, the skyscraper, had been appreciated best by a foreigner and not his own countrymen.

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Although the area surrounding the Powhatan never became the "Streeterville" of the South Side in terms of the density of development, the area has an understated elegance, stemming from the proximity to Burnham Park and the lake and from the excellent maintenance of the buildings. The original character of the Powhatan design is remarkably intact, a testament not only to the vitality of this timeless design but to the commitment of its owners to its preservation. The newer buildings in the area are more massive and less animated in their designs than the older buildings. Amidst these newer, more spartan towers, the Powhatan is a dynamic architectural essay, commanding its lakefront site by the power of its expressive design.



A view of the Chicago Beach Drive entrance, illustrating the Art Deco styling of the doors and light fixtures. *(Timothy Wittman, photographer)*

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Additional research material used in the preparation of this report is on file at the office of the Commission on Chicago Landmarks and is available to the public.

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*Staff for this publication:* Timothy Barton

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*The Commission on Chicago Landmarks was established in 1968 by city ordinance, and was given the responsibility of recommending to the City Council that specific landmarks be preserved and protected by law. The ordinance states that the Commission, whose nine members are appointed by the Mayor, can recommend any area, building, structure, work of art, or other object that has sufficient historical, community, or aesthetic value. Once the City Council acts on the Commission's recommendation and designates a Chicago Landmark, the ordinance provides for the preservation, protection, enhancement, rehabilitation, and perpetuation of that landmark. The Commission assists by carefully reviewing all applications for building permits pertaining to the designated Chicago Landmarks. This insures that any proposed alteration does not detract from the qualities that caused the landmark to be designated.*

*The Commission makes its recommendations to the City Council only after extensive study. This preliminary summary of information has been prepared by the Commission staff and was submitted to the Commission when it initiated consideration of the historical and architectural qualities of this potential landmark.*